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Let them decide

Civilians trapped with Tamil Tiger fighters must be offered an exit before a bloodbath ensues



John Holmes

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As London witnesses Tamil protests, a bloodbath on the beaches of northern Sri Lanka seems an increasingly real possibility. The Sri Lankan military has pushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam into an area so small that any shooting or shelling inevitably causes casualties among the 150,000 to 190,000 civilians trapped in the same zone. There have been many hundreds of civilian deaths caused by firing from both sides, though exact numbers and who fired what and when are impossible to verify. It is clear that the LTTE is refusing to let people flee, though many are managing to escape somehow, and I fear the combatants may be gearing up for a final confrontation. This is a very grave situation.

As a full-scale, long-term ceasefire is unlikely to be agreed now, the only way to get the civilians out of harm's way is a temporary humanitarian lull, during which aid workers and relief supplies must be allowed into the conflict zone, and those who want to leave must be given the chance to do so.

Both sides have a duty to bring this about. The LTTE's leadership claims the civilians in the conflict zone do not want to leave because they accompanied the LTTE voluntarily in the first place and are afraid of government reprisals. Yet there are continuing reports that the group's fighters are shooting at fleeing civilians, limiting fishing and sabotaging boats that might be used to escape, and forcing people to fight against their will. Civilians trapped by the fighting must be allowed a free choice of whether to leave or stay, as we have made clear to the LTTE. If the LTTE truly has the best interests of the Tamil people at heart, they should contribute to ending this unnecessary civilian suffering.

For its part, the government of Sri Lanka must stick to its promise of not using heavy weapons while the fighting lasts, and hold off from any final attack in the conflict zone while the pause is negotiated. With so many people packed into such a small area, further military action not only risks more civilian deaths and injuries but also threatens to undermine the government's credibility with the international community and the national groups with whom it must soon seek reconciliation.

At this critical juncture independent aid workers must be allowed to bring in more aid, assess the situation and help civilians to decide their own fate. Indeed, unless better access for supplies and aid workers is urgently secured, the ravages of disease, untreated wounds and hunger will kill many more people.

The government must also show flexibility by recognising that many of the civilians in the conflict zone have genuine fears about possible mistreatment, whether the government deems them well-founded or not. It must also make clear that the safety of all civilians will be guaranteed, and that all those laying down their arms will be treated

in accordance with the rule of law.

A vital part of this is ensuring that treatment of internally displaced people is in line with international standards - including the need for transparent screening and registration processes, guaranteed freedom of movement, and commitments to ensure speedy return to their places of origin. If the UN can play a role in bringing this about and monitoring it with other international groups, it is fully ready to do so.

Beyond this we need an end to the conflict, and rapid political progress to tackle the underlying issues through the devolution of power and long-term accommodation and reconciliation. With thousands of lives in the balance and the clock ticking, the time for decisive action by the government, the LTTE and the international community is now, before it is too late.

- Sir John Holmes is UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief co-ordinator

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